

Save the Drama

Being unable to control our emotions in a professional manner is similar to a skunk's odor: foul and offending.

By Bruce J. Green

I received a phone call the other day from an irate airfield manager. He felt there was too much “chatter” on the ground FM net, which is primarily used for vehicle operations. Not beyond blowing a gasket myself on occasion, I let him continue uninterrupted, until finally he suffered a compressor stall. Sensing a “Dr. Phil” moment, I asked him to tell me what really was wrong.

The airfield manager quietly admitted the real “rub” was that the ground controller had issued “traffic” on a taxiing airplane that clearly was in view to him. The inference was that the airfield manager, with his 20 years of experience, needed to have his hand held while driving around the airfield. Because of this, the airfield manager began to focus less on maneuvering his vehicle, and more on his emotional response to the controller. This phenomenon is known as “emotional jet lag,” and none of us are immune from its grip.


After explaining to the airfield manager that he was being too “sensitive” about the whole ordeal, the airfield manager promptly performed a suborbital ballistic maneuver, and terminated the call.

Later that day, I decided to stretch my legs by taking a walk up to the tower cab. I barely had cleared the top step when the guys unloaded on me about “some controller” at our parent approach-control facility that had “copped” an attitude. I listened and reflected back on those times when some faceless voice in my ear, be it a controller or pilot, had pushed my emotions throttle to the hilt. I believe we focus more on a perceived attitude and less on separating and sequencing aircraft; we have too much emotional jet lag.

As emerging technologies continue to drive the migration of automation, one limiting factor continues: human to human communication. Communications over radios or telephones add a unique dimension to message transfer and interpretation. Emotional reactions such as irritation, anger, and even boredom easily can be detected. Who among us hasn't worked opposite of some grouchy controller or irate pilot who seemed

intent on making everyone around them miserable?

Being unable to control our emotions in a professional manner is similar to a skunk's odor: foul and offending. It sabotages our fellow controllers and teammates by giving them a case of “emotional jet lag,” causing them to lose focus on the task at hand. Being consumed by an irrelevant comment or attitude, real or imagined dramatically can degrade your situational awareness.

How can we unscramble this egg? Talk to a fighter pilot. Fighter pilots are legendary for their coolness under pressure. They operate in an environment that requires perceiving, reasoning, and projecting, all at 600 knots with a bogey on their tail. Good pilots don't saddle their wingmen with emotional drag; they save it for the debrief, and that's where it stays. So, until technology unplugs us from the console, I suggest we practice a little professional swagger ourselves by adopting a page from the fighter-pilot community: “Save the drama for your momma.” 

Mr. Green is an air-traffic manager for the 178th fighter Wing at Springfield Municipal airport, Ohio.

Air Traffic Controllers Creed

I am a professional air traffic controller dedicated to the service of my country. As such, I will endeavor to provide the best possible service to all users of the ATC system. I will constantly strive to improve my proficiency. I will endeavor to reason logically and accurately and avoid making decisions based on emotions and accept accountability for my actions. I will work constantly and tirelessly to achieve a professional level in my performance. I will always keep abreast of new developments in the air traffic control field through study and research. I will insist upon high standards of professional performance from my subordinates, and will practice self-discipline and set an example regardless of the position I may occupy.